

Steeplechasing 101: Diary from Junior Camp

by Regina Welsh

In 2004, my friend Anne Hambleton and I attempted to provide a unique learning experience for young riders interested in steeplechasing. It was such a success that, despite hectic personal schedules, we did it again July 31-Aug. 4, 2005. We chose three youngsters with great credentials from a group of aspiring jockeys. All had submitted letters of recommendation from equine professionals, resumes of their riding careers to date, and essays about why they wanted to attend the North American Point-to-Point Association's Junior Steeplechase Camp/Clinic.

DAY 1 – The Plains, VA

Anne and I decided to mix it up a little this year and start our camp in Virginia. Marylander Willie White, 16, Pennsylvanian Alli Sirna, 16, and Virginian Erica Fleming, 18, had never met each other until their parents dropped them off this afternoon at the Virginia Gold Cup course.

"Nick" and Peggy Arundel, chaser owners and creators of this prestigious racing venue, joined NAPPA board member and amateur jockey Rob Banner in arranging a course visit and cookout. Nick showed the group racing videos until top trainer Neil Morris and jockeys Xavier "Xav" Aizpuru and Rob Massey arrived. Then our excited future race riders walked parts of the renowned course with the pros, who explained the technical aspects of race riding and offered lots of tips.

After a fantastic barbeque, Neil, Xav and Rob Massey fielded questions and told lots of stories.

Then we headed off to spend the night in leading amateur jockey Gregg Ryan's bunkhouse. Before they hit the sack, Gregg showed the kids some old race videos, including his winning trip on Eclipse Award winner Flat Top in the 1998 Colonial Cup.

DAY 2 – Middleburg, VA / Glyndon and Monkton, MD

We roused the gang at 5:15 a.m. and began the morning drop-off. Willie found himself at Doug Four's barn, home of Eclipse Award winner Hirapour. Alli was lucky enough to spend the morning at the high-tech Kinross Farm, under Neil Morris' wing. And steeplechase jockey-turned-trainer Simon Hobson took Erica Fleming as his pupil for the morning. All three campers had amazing opportunities at their assigned barns.

When it came time to pick the kids up, Anne and I realized this camp was already a hit. They just couldn't stop babbling about their morning! Alli got to jog a few sets on Kinross' all weather-gallop alongside Xav Aizpuru, Paddy Young, and Chris Read. "Neil told me to remember the names of the horses that I was riding, so later on I could read about them and say, 'Hey, I've ridden that horse that just won!'" she said. Then the trainer made her day by taking her out to pop an old timber horse over some fences.

After her morning with Simon, Erica remarked that she had never seen such prestigious training facilities before. "I was amazed at how well all of the horses I encountered today are taken care of," she said.

As for Willie, he said his morn-



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The NAPPA junior steeplechase campers stop for lunch with amateur rider Gregg Ryan. From left, Alli Sirna, Erica Fleming, Ryan, and Willie White

ing shadowing Dougie was just plain "awesome!" (He got to school two horses over hurdles and gallop on the track.)

Before leaving Virginia, Neil treated us to a tour of Kinross Farm, which features an indoor arena with automatic doors, all-weather footing, and natural cedar hurdles.

After a quick lunch and Q & A session with Gregg Ryan, we packed into the van and drove to Monkton. Anne and I had some pretty tired campers on our hands; they all fell asleep on the drive up.

We got back just in time to walk the granddaddy of all timber courses -- the Maryland Hunt Cup layout at Worthington Farms -- with former Hunt Cup winner (and Master of Foxhounds) Liz McKnight. Then Liz and Turney McKnight, trainer Alicia Murphy, trainer Billy Santoro, and NSA steward and trainer Ross Pearce joined the campers at Foxfire Farm (Willie's parents' place) in Monkton. There, everyone had a great dinner and watched the video used in stewards' school to educate would-be stewards about claims of foul. Ross commented, from a stewards' perspective, on all of the possible mistakes a jockey or horse can make in a race.

DAY 3 – Butler, MD

This morning, Willie took the opportunity to exercise his own horses at his family's farm, while the girls had an exciting time with trainer Jack Fisher, learning how to treadmill horses and how to ride those a little stronger than their usual mounts.

"Today I learned from Jack how to deal with a horse that is out of control," Erica said, laughing, when I went to pick her up. Both of the girls were surprised at how "spirited" the horses in training were.

"It's not every day that you get the chance to be in the presence of such amazing horses, and ride out with trainers you have envied for so long," chirped Alli.

Next we went to Northwoods, the barn where I train, so they could ride another set and review the not-so-glamorous details of training -- i.e. tack, bandaging, feeding, and shoeing.

After another grueling morning, Anne collected everyone and headed over to Alicia's house, where the campers swam in her pool, learned how to flip a kayak, and enjoyed lunch.

Late that afternoon, we took everyone over to Sportsman's Hall for a mounted lesson from Liz. Dan and Kelly Colhoun generously lent Alli, Willie, and Erica their polo ponies, so they could practice galloping in a group and other racing tactics. Liz rode along with the kids and we set up some race-riding situations. Then the Colhouns had the whole crew over for a cookout and more race videos.

DAY 4 – Saratoga Springs, NY

Anne volunteered to do the Maryland-to-Saratoga drive with the kids, while I flew up to New York. We met in the grandstand at

(continued)



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Trainer Neil Morris, left, shows Anne Hambleton and the campers the all-weather gallop at Virginia's Kinross Farm.

Steeplechasing 101, contd.

Saratoga Racecourse, just as the horses were approaching the start for the first race. Fortunately, some generous folks had donated their finish line box seats to our group. Unfortunately, Erica and Alli's new heartthrob Xav, whom they'd met in Virginia, had a nasty fall in the first race. They were disappointed not to see him in the winner's circle, but loved the fact that he talked to them in the paddock afterwards, grass-stained breeches and all.

We stuck around and watched another jump race and some flat races. Then we went over to the Oklahoma Training Track Annex, where all of the jumpers are stabled. There, the campers got to meet some of the trainers, riders, and horses from the first race. Danielle "Danny" Hodsdon, a top female jump jockey, took time out of her busy schedule to talk to us about the trials and tribulations of being a female in a largely male sport.

Anne went home to Vermont and left me in charge of the gang. We all headed back to the hotel and rested up for our second exciting day at "The Spa," as Saratoga is known.

DAY 5 – Saratoga Springs, NY

"I just can't stop smiling," Alli said as we pulled into the dusty barnyard at the Annex. "This is such a great experience. I don't want it to end."

This morning, bright and early, we met up with National Steeplechase Association president and Hall of Fame trainer Jonathan Sheppard.

Everyone had plenty of questions. He showed us his top horses and we got to watch them work on the turf course. Danny works for him, so our aspiring jockeys also got to reconnect with her and ask more questions. Jonathan explained his training regimen and how he picks out horses. After getting as much out of Jonathan as we could, we headed over to the National Racing Museum and Hall of Fame, where our group got to see a great film on the evolution of American racing and learn all about key horses and people throughout the sport's history.

Constance White, Willie's mom, treated us to lunch. She took us to the prestigious, members-only Reading Room, where the silks of famous owners like Ogden Phipps graced the walls of the porch. Then we went to the track for another great day of racing.

This was the final day of our trip, and we all went our separate ways after the races. I was the lucky one who got to drive the mini-van back to Maryland. By this time, you could barely read the "Saratoga or Bust" scrawled by the kids on the dusty back window at the start of the trip.

Our young equestrians departed Saratoga with a new outlook on jump racing, lots of new contacts, and the hope of becoming professional steeplechase jockeys one day. Personally, I think they will have a lot of summer job offers next year.

Willie learned a lot about the tactics and skills needed to be successful, "but also about the mindset and the importance of out-of-the-saddle work," he said. "My favorite thing was Saratoga.

I thought that observing horses, trainers, and jockeys in action was very informative." Getting to work with top trainers "opened a lot of doors for me," he continued. "Meeting people like Jonathan Sheppard and hanging out with Gregg Ryan was definitely a high point."

Meanwhile, Erica said she learned a lot more about racing than her experiences to date had taught her. She planned to put all of her new bandaging and horse care skills to use when she got back home.

For her part, Alli said she'd "found new meaning in watching races and reading steeplechase results. This trip has given me the confidence that I, as a female, can become a competitive threat to the other top steeplechase jockeys someday."

"I always viewed steeplechase racing as a male-dominated sport. Meeting Danny and the other female jockeys gave me hope, and really encourages me to continue to strive to be the best I can be," she continued. "It would be pretty awesome to read my name among the other jockeys' [names] in magazines and newspapers someday." ■

Ed's note: The author is the executive director of the North American Point-to-Point Association, co-chair of the Junior Maryland Hunt Cup, and trainer of 2004 Maryland Hunt Cup winner Bug River. Her fellow camp organizer, Anne Hambleton, is an amateur jockey with considerable experience riding (and winning) over timber.

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